Reviewer's report

Title: Exploring the factors affecting the implementation of tobacco and substance use interventions within a secondary school setting: a systematic review

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Reviewer: Kenneth Allison

Reviewer's report:

The authors have conducted a research synthesis review (described by the authors as a "narrative approach to synthesis" in one section) comprised of 15 quantitative and qualitative studies of school-based implementation outcomes and, in some instances, the factors influencing implementation outcomes. They draw on a number of elements of systematic reviews (reference to PRISMA, designation of criteria for assessing the quality of quantitative and qualitative studies). While the authors refer to the term systematic review in the title of their paper and throughout the text, this raises questions as to how best to designate the study - is it a systematic review, a research synthesis, or narrative review? Since the 15 studies included are so disparate in content and methods, making it difficult to discern the relative importance of findings, designation of the work as a systematic review may not be warranted. In summary, it is possible to conduct a review systematically without it being a systematic review. Given that the review includes: both quantitative and qualitative studies; with content of interventions ranging from tobacco, to alcohol, to other drugs, or some combination of these (not always specified in the paper); and intervention approaches delivered by a variety of personnel (teachers, police, research project team members), it is very difficult to identify key findings that clearly indicate what approaches may be most evidence-informed or potentially effective in influencing implementation outcomes. However, the authors may want to situate their review by drawing back from attempts to use components of systematic reviews when they may not be warranted - better to call in a narrative review, a synthesis, a scoping review or whatever the most appropriate description fits best with some of the limitations identified here.

I did not find the paper to be particularly easy to read. Parts of the paper lacked clarity (a few examples are raised below) but, more than that, the attempt to use the template for Normalization Process Theory, though potentially useful, did not seem to contribute to the review, but added yet another set of classifications that contributed to its complexity. Since, as the authors point out, the various studies were very heterogeneous, this makes the use of such classification designations limited. Examples of lack of clarity include:

- page 4, line 37, "factors affecting the embedding of substance use interventions".
- page 7, line 41, "There was also a paper...". Perhaps say, "... an additional paper...". 
- page 8, line 21, "The weakest papers...". Perhaps say, "The papers considered to be weakest...".
- page 9, line 4, "...there was no difference to whether other teachers...". Perhaps say, "...there was no difference as to whether...."
- Several locations in the paper the authors treat data as singular (e.g., data was, data is). These should read as data were, data are, etc.

It is not entirely clear exactly how the current review is positioned relative to existing scientific literature regarding implementation outcomes, and factors associated with these, in relation to substance use interventions or related school-based interventions (physical activity, nutrition, sexual health). That is, what is the context of previous conceptual and empirical work in this area and how does that represent a gap in understanding that the current review addresses? Also related to context is the importance of mentioning that much of the earlier empirical findings in reviews of the effects of tobacco, alcohol and drug education programs did not indicate it to be effective (or in some studies increased use). While this question is beyond the scope of the present review, it is nevertheless important contextual information that would add to both the introduction/background and discussion sections. I found the Background section to be particularly limited in setting the stage for the methods and results of the review. Even the initial rationale statement is limited, since adverse health behaviours are not just "likely to be established" and "tracked" in adolescence but this is also an important life stage for experimenting and making decisions regarding some of these behaviours. This is an example of additional material that may serve to strengthen the Background section.

The Methods section identifies many of the characteristics and criteria influencing eligibility of studies for the review. The initial description in this section would read with greater clarity if written in a narrative (paragraph) style as opposed to simply using short categories (inclusion criteria, etc.). In the list of key words described in the search strategy, there did not appear to be any specific listing of tobacco, alcohol, drugs or substance use. Are the authors confident that the most relevant studies were included in these content areas?

As mentioned above, the Results section is overly long and very descriptive, perhaps because the authors devoted considerable space to describing individual studies - material that for the most part is covered in the Table. The authors may wish to consider describing the most salient findings in this section and refer the reader to the tables for additional descriptive details. Also, as mentioned earlier, the heterogeneity of the 15 studies makes it difficult to interpret those findings that may be important but need to be considered as inconclusive at present.
The Discussion section presents some interesting summary findings, though they may be better reported in the Results section, as mentioned. Some implications for school policy and practice are raised though, again, they must be considered tentative given the diversity of methods and content areas reviewed in the studies. In the limitations section the authors should expand on the issue of heterogeneity and discuss related limitations regarding the difficulty of assessing multiple topics and greatly different interventions and methods used to describe them.

References


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